DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 424 574 CS 216 498

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TITLE Telling Stories: The Subject Is Never Just Me.
PUB DATE 1998-04-00
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (49th, Chicago, IL, April 1-4, 1998).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Bias; Class Activities; Ethnography; Higher Education; *Ideology; *Personal Narratives; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Essentialism

ABSTRACT

The lures and the risks of using personal stories in research and pedagogy are considerable. One danger of using experience as evidence is that "an experience" becomes the foundation for the construction of an essentialized identity: for example, a woman's experience becomes woman's experience. Despite the risks, however, telling stories allows teachers and students to identify and critique the ideologies which produce them as subjects. Some of the early stories respondents told in an ethnographic study of gender, writing, and teaching (for which 10 women who teach composition courses were interviewed) demonstrate how an examination of the role of the mother in their stories can lead to larger questions about their desire (at this time and in this location) to reproduce certain constructions of the mother, and not others. After writing about a particular event that was a "turning point" in their education, certain classroom exercises help students read their own narratives critically and reflexively, learning to recognize, analyze and critique the biases in their own stories. What similar plots and contradictions are found in these stories, how have they come to be telling the same story, and how did the plot come to be that way in the first place? Why do they desire to represent themselves this way and not another, to position themselves within or outside of particular identity categories? Personal narratives are never just about "me"; rather they are about a "me" constituted by gender, class, race, ethnicity, historical moments, and particular locales. When composition instructors are reflexive about the stories they tell and how those stories tell on them as well, they can begin to construct different stories which have the potential to interrupt entrenched discourses around gender, race, class, ethnicity, and education. (SR)

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ED 424 574

Telling Stories: The Subject Is Never Just Me

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Expressivism and a belief in the "individual" story may be theoretically out of fashion in composition studies, but the personal narrative—retheorized via cultural studies and re-presented as ethnography—has never been more popular. Witness the theme of this convention and Villanueva's invitation to us to discover, as we tell our "cuentos," that "we are more alike than different, even when the differences remain." As a feminist doing ethnographic work, I feel reassured by Villanueva's belief in the power of our stories to bring us together, but I also hear opposing voices. There is "something fatally alluring about personal testimony"(132), Linda Kauffman writes in "The Long Goodby: Against personal testimony or, an infant grifter grows up," describing the temptation to view life stories as "coherent, unified" and "inherently paradigmatic" (133). In this presentation, I discuss the lure and the risks of using personal stories in our research and pedagogy. Despite the risks, however, I believe that telling our stories allows us, and our students, to identify and critique the ideologies which produce us as subjects and which necessitate alliances based on shared characteristics.

I acknowledge that this is a risky argument. In "The Pedagogy of Pleasure 2: the Me-In-Crisis," Mas'ud Zavarzedeh castigates "experientialists" who talk incessantly about subjectivity. The goal, he says, of such "a reactionary and anti-intellectual move is

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to substitute experience for concept, me for history, the singular for the collective" (9). Similarly, Joan Scott, in "Experience," critiques our tendency to accept the truth of a subject's account of his/her own experience rather than asking how experiences and subjects are constituted as different or similar in the first place. The greatest danger of using experience as evidence, Scott argues, is that "an experience" becomes the foundation for the construction of an essentialized identity. For example, a woman's experience becomes woman's experience and women's history is constructed from the stories women tell. In this way, the personal literally becomes political because, Scott says, "the possibility of politics is said to rest on, to follow from, a preexisting women's experience" (31).

With such persuasive voices speaking in this conversation, I often find it difficult not to capitulate and admit that they are right—that telling our "individual" stories and then reassuring ourselves that "we are more alike than different" is not a defensible position; "affirmation of the existing does not lead to social transformation," as Zavarzedeh writes (6). Yet, I also believe that if, as Zavarzedeh argues, the students are already too immersed in "their own local narratives (7), we must help them to become critical and reflexive readers of those narratives. If culture speaks itself through our stories, what do our stories tell about particular cultural moments? What similar plots and/or contradictions do we find and why? Why do we desire—always embedded in social context—to represent ourselves this way and not another? To position ourselves within or outside of particular identity categories?

To illustrate what this kind of analysis can tell us and our students, I will begin with a discussion of some of the early literacy stories my respondents told in my ethnographic

study of gender, writing, and teaching writing for which I interviewed ten women who routinely teach composition courses. I show how an examination of the role of the mother in their stories can lead to larger questions about our desire (at this time and in this location) to reproduce certain constructions of the mother and not others. Next I will describe classroom exercises I've designed to help students read their own narratives critically and reflexively. When I entitled this work "Telling Stories: the Subject Is Never Just Me," I was alluding to the discursive practices that lead us to understand and tell our life stories in certain ways and not others, depending upon what it is we wish to explain to our listeners (and to ourselves). Not exactly truths, but not fibs either, the stories we tell tell on us as well. And what do they tell?

When I asked the ten women I interviewed to recall their earliest literacy memories, six responded with nostalgic evocations of their mother's central role. In The Web of Meaning, Janet Emig describes the mother as the child's "first co-speaker/co-writer"; she is "his (sic) collaborator in formulation [of an utterance], his reformulator, and his first audience." This early relationship, Emig suggests, may contain "the origins of all three components of mature rhetoric—that is, (1) the shaping and (2) the reshaping of spoken or written discourse (3) to satisfy the needs of an audience" (58-9).[1]

Emig's words about a mother's role in the child's language development, as well as my own memories, kept coming back to me as I talked with my respondents about their own early literacy development. Time and again, the women mentioned their mothers: It was mother who encouraged them to read and gave them space and time; mother who bought writing supplies when she went to the grocery store. Mother who was recalled as

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the "first teacher." In her notes on the sample papers she had given me to look at, Isa, one of my respondents, ends with a description of a journal she kept for a graduate course in rhetoric:

> In my journal, I described how my mother taught me to read and write before I was three, how she bent over my shoulder and held my hand in hers as we traced letters. She'd enunciate them softly and I'd echo her. I remember the colors: the blues of the sky, the reds and yellows and greens of our garden, the silvers and golds of the Caribbean sun beating on our cement floor. I remember her fragrance, her smile, my father blowing her kisses every so often. Reading, writing, happiness. That's the equation I remember.

Jan called her mother her "first responsive reader" and said,

> I certainly felt that part of the process was going over the draft with my mother. You know? And us talking it through and talking about different ways, and so forth. So I think the overlay then of her saying, "Okay. This is good," made a big difference. ... Once I started tutoring in the Writing Center, I used that image of sitting at the kitchen table reading my paper aloud while my mother cooked or puttered at the sink as a kind of touchstone for what was happening in the tutorial.

Historically, mothers, as Emig's words illustrate so vividly, have been expected to nurture the child's language development, and this expectation often extends to the higher literacy behaviors of reading and writing, as Emig also notes. Emig does not account for differences in mothering behavior based on class, race, or ethnicity, but, I would argue, she is describing the mothering "plot" that is most widely available in our culture. With some variations, this is the plot six of my nine respondents also recited. It

is a plot I too can recite. Our mothers (or perhaps our grandmothers) nurtured us as readers and writers and are lovingly recalled as the caretakers of literacy as well as avid readers and writers themselves. (Note: I'm using "plot" to mean cultural and social positioning, not conscious constructions.)

This is not to say that the women will always recite the same plot no matter what the context is for retelling the story. As Catherine Kohler Reissman points out in Narrative Analysis, "narratives are laced with social discourses and power relations, which do not remain constant over time . . . ." Furthermore, the same event can be told in very different ways depending upon the narrator's, and the listener's, interests. "Plots are not innocent; they have agendas hidden in them that shape what gets excluded and included, as fact and fiction merge" (65). Reissman's point here needs clarification. The agendas "hidden" in our narratives are sometimes consciously hidden by the narrator but more often are hidden from the narrator as well. In the same way, the listener/researcher brings hidden agendas to her listening and subsequent reconstruction of the "plot." So we need to be both critical and reflexive in our analysis of the stories and our reasons for hearing them in certain ways. Le me illustrate what I mean.

I might ask what agendas are being served by a narrative in which mother is "incredibly smart" or a gifted poet or a talented letter writer, as my respondents recalled? Mothers' special abilities certainly reflect well on their daughters, and, in some cases, can be used to explain a woman's own classically feminine academic choices, an explanation which might proceed this way, for example: I was always good at reading and writing, just as my mother was always good in that area, so majoring in English just seemed like the natural thing to do. The women's stories may also be an attempt to help redress what

is felt to be the mother's relative invisibility in terms of careers that count in the public sphere. (I recognize that this mothering plot is gradually changing as more and more women enter high tech professions.)

In the process of generalizing about mothers and daughters from my respondents' narratives, I have flattened out differences and seemingly re-inscribed the categories I want to destablize. Yet there is value in bringing together similar plots in that we can question not only how we have come to be telling the same story but also how the plot came to be that way in the first place.

But the story Samantha, another of my respondents, told offers an altogether different plot. Sam's mother dropped out of school in tenth grade and, according to Sam, lived with a man who beat her and sat "in the living room loading and unloading shotguns threatening to kill us all." She remembered writing at home "when I would get angry or when he was fussing and raising hell all night I would just write a journal, but then I'd tear it up because I was afraid if he found it, he'd kill me." When Sam's mother left that man, she moved back to her own mother's house and then "she was running around dating all the time . I spent more time in beer joints before I was six years old than most people spend in their life."

A story like Sam's, while very different from what I heard from any of the other respondents, reveals the fissures within the identity "mother" and thus calls attention to the ways in which that identity has been constructed, for middle class women in particular. . It is important to locate the places where the traditional mothering stories break down. Sam's story of her mother hanging out in beer joints, for example, is in sharp contrast to the nostalgic images of the mother evoked in the other stories. Her

mothering story is a reminder of the appeal of certain constructions over others in the reproduction of mothering. And here I need to call attention to my own feminist reading of these mothering stories. I have a particular agenda for re-presenting my respondents' stories this way and, of course, the context of my questions may also have evoked these memories rather than others which may have been equally memorable.

In "Writing on the Bias," Linda Brodky tells her own literacy story, evoking memories of her mother and her mother's friends sitting together sewing and talking while she read. Yet Brodky's essay is much more than a sentimental evocation of her mother's kitchen-friends. As with Brodky's other work, this is a story about gender and class and the importance of learning, as she says, "what every writer knows, that one writes on the bias or not at all," the bias being a theory, an experience, an image, or an ideology (546).

To illustrate how we can lead our students to recognize, analyze, and critique the biases in their own stories, I'll describe an exercise I've used with both freshmen and advanced writers. I begin by asking students to write about one specific event that was a "turning point" in their education.. When the students bring their narratives to class, I ask them to answer a number of questions about how they decided to begin and end the narrative (an important part of narrative analysis), whether they fictionalized anything, how "truthful" the story is, and so on. These questions begin a discussion of the human need to tell stories as a way to understand one's life. Turning point stories constitute one category of coherent life stories, which is something we also discuss (Charlotte Linde, Life Stories).

Next I put students into random groups and ask them to share and compare their versions with each other and then to map the similarities and differences among the

stories. I also give them sections of Kohler's monograph to read. By working collectively, students begin to analyze the narratives and the range of plots that are available to them here in the United States. I ask them to note whether someone has not been educated in the U.S. My intention in this exercise is to encourage students to look at how narrative structure shapes their experiences but also to recognize that "experience" itself is a linguistic event shaped by ideology (e.g. education in a democracy) and history. I also ask them to look for linguistic markers which indicate that they assume others will understand their stories ("needless to say," "you can see").

When the groups report their findings to the class, we analyze the kinds of stories which are told in the U.S. about education (e.g., individual achievement, getting ahead with an education, the remarkable teacher who opened my eyes). Last semester, an African-American student took issue with the "you can get ahead with an education" plots. It was exciting to hear her challenge those plots based on the perceived reality for her and other African Americans for whom education has often held out false promises. In examining stories—those we tell and those which are told about us—I ask students to look for commonalities in the narratives because the commonalities enable us to see not only how we are written by culture but also what it means to be "written" into certain stories and not into others. But I also ask them to look for the rifts, the contradictions, in each person's story because, as Paul Smith explains in "Discerning the Subject,"

> subjects do not remain consistent and coherent in the passage of time: both they and the discourses they inhabit have histories and memories which alter in constitution over time. Additionally, the interplay of differing subject-positions will make some appear pleasurable and others less so; thus a tension is produced

> which compels a person to legislate among them. So, in that light, it can be said that a person is not simply determined and dominated by the ideological pressures of any overarching discourse or ideology but is also the agent of a certain discernment. A person is not simply an actor who follows ideological scripts, but is also an agent who reads them in order to insert him/herself into them—or not (xxxiv-xxxv). .

Agency, according to Smith, marks the "form of subjectivity where, by virtue of the contradictions and disturbances in and among subject-positions, the possibility (indeed the actuality) of resistance to ideological pressure is allowed for (even though that resistance too must be produced in an ideological context" (xxxv). If I apply Smith's words to my teaching practices, I must also admit my desire tohave students locate and resist those subject positions I have identified as part of my political project.

Personal narratives are never just about "me"; rather they are about a "me" constituted by gender, class, race, ethnicity, historical moments, and particular locales. I am not naïve enough to believe that teaching my students to be reflexive and critical readers of their own stories will allow them to resist the subject-positions those stories reveal (or obscure). I can almost hear Linda Kauffman's voice shouting in my ear, "Writing about yourself does not liberate you, it just shows how ingrained the ideology of freedom through self-expression is in our thinking" (139). But, as I said earlier in this presentation, I believe we have to start with the familiar and often-told narratives—for it is only when we—both students and teachers—are reflexive about the stories we tell and understand how those stories tell on us as well, that we can begin to construct different

stories, stories which have the potential to interrupt entrenched discourses around gender, race, class, ethnicity, and education.